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Baseball diamond shortage leading to lost opportunity for Aurora, King kids

By Brock Weir

Just two more baseball diamonds could lead to a world of difference for budding athletes in Aurora and King.
On Wednesday, Council had a special meeting for members of the public to weigh in on how to improve the community through better budgeting.
The pitch for Wednesday's meeting was Council seeing suggestions on how to increase revenues, save money on Town services, and hear from community groups looking for special grant funding or services in Town.
Some initiatives, however, are already in the air, including ways to address the needs of young members of the Aurora King Baseball Association.
Council is now exploring options on including at least two new baseball diamonds as part of Council's 2018 budget deliberations.
Groundwork was laid through a motion from Councillor Harold Kim and approved by Council earlier this spring after Jamie Cole, President of the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA) raised alarm bells over a shortage.
According to Mr. Cole, the shortage has left some kids at a disadvantage in trying to get up to bat.
The renewed success of the Toronto Blue Jays, among other factors, has led to a local surge in the sport's popularity, leaving the Aurora King Baseball Association (AKBA) busting at the seams, he said, noting that demand for diamond time is far outstripping supply, leading the AKBA to seek expensive solutions in Newmarket or, worse, leave some teams benched.
?Our Rep program has been constant over the last decade-plus, not because there isn't a desire or talent, because there certainly is, but because we don't have the diamond time to add more teams,? said Mr. Cole. ?We have done many things to adjust to what diamond time is available. We have increased team sizes within house league, we have 13 kids per team now, more than ideal when we have kids sitting on the bench when we would rather have them in the game. We have increased the number of byes the teams have and that would mean a whole team sitting out the night or, in some cases, more than one. We have doubled up in the shortened practices. We have teams practicing on diamonds that are not appropriate for their age level. We have started scheduling games on Sunday night, taking away some weekend times and family time away from groups that want to enjoy the game. Most sadly, last year we have had to turn some kids away from baseball.
?We have been doing everything we can.?
Back in April, the AKBA secured the use of one diamond in Newmarket courtesy of the York Regional Police Association. They will be using the diamond three nights a week every week, alleviating some of the pressures they are currently experiencing, but it comes at a high financial cost to the organization.
While the Association serves kids from both Aurora and King ? with a small percentage coming from Oak Ridges and Newmarket ? the AKBA uses a larger number of diamonds in King Township just to account for the size of the organization, even though Aurora members are by far in the majority at close to 75 per cent.
?If we had more diamonds we would be able to provide a better experience for the kids and parents which keep kids active in the community and enjoying the game of baseball,? said Mr. Cole. ?We are at least two diamonds short in Aurora, probably more. Diamonds without mounds that can be used for kids aged 15 and younger, similar to the one at Optimist Park or the Leisure Complex diamond. Even a single diamond at this point would make a huge difference.
?I realise that land and funding are always at a premium and decisions on how to use them are not, and should not, be taken lightly. The goal here today is to make you aware of just how short we are on diamonds so when you are looking forward at the plans of the Town and debating how you can invest in the Town that they give the idea of new ball diamonds its due. For a ball diamond, once you have the land we just need an infield, a back stop, two benches and we're ready to play. You can get a basic diamond from around $150,000 when you have the land. All we need are simple diamonds.?
Council referred Mr. Cole's comment to municipal staff for their input, and did so with a note of sympathy for the AKBA.
?I am very sad that you have had to turn away individuals who want to play,? said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. ?I am looking forward to hearing what staff have to say between yourselves to work through whatever we can do to provide the diamond space you need.?
With acres of land at the former Hallmark Building near Industrial Parkway and Vandorf Sideroad secured for parks and recreation, that might provide an opportunity.
?We can probably see this in our growth plans and budgets and start addressing that,? said Councillor John Abel.
If Aurora added two more diamonds, Mr. Cole assured Council, they would be used every night of the week not just by them, but

other community groups as well.